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ABSTRACT

Since the 1970s, federal legislation and public and private sector initiatives have attempted to increase the numbers of women employed in occupations considered nontraditional for females. In 1998, women accounted for 20-25% of employees in a handful of nontraditional occupations (NTOs) but less than 10% of employees in many other NTOs. Secondary vocational enrollments remain largely gender segregated, and although enrollment of women in postsecondary education has increased overall, the numbers of women remain small in many program areas. Reasons for this limited progress in increasing the numbers of women preparing for NTOs include the following: Perkins equity and single-parent/displaced homemaker grants have been small and few in number; equity remains a low priority and is not adequately addressed in teacher education; and appropriations for equity provisions in some legislation are minimal or nonexistent. The greatest increase of women in NTOs has been in professions; however, most women (73%) remain in nonprofessional occupations. Some barriers to increasing the number of women in NTOs remain impervious to the legislative and educational remedies attempted over the past 3 decades. To succeed, efforts to boost the numbers of women in NTOs must be institutionalized rather than simply viewed as add-ons, and corrective measures should address the wider sociocultural issues that constitute the greatest barriers. (Contains 21 references.) (MN)

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Myths and Realities No. 1

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ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education

by Sandra Kerka

MYTHS AND REALITIES 1999
NO. 1

Has Nontraditional Training Worked for Women?

We've come a long way—maybe. After more than a quarter century of federal legislation and public and private sector initiatives, is the concept of "nontraditional occupations" (NTOs) disappearing? Are women making inroads into fields in which they have traditionally been underrepresented? This publication investigates nontraditional training and employment for women, exploring failures, successes, and remaining barriers for women in the workplace.

The Best of Intentions...

In the 1970s, the imbalance in gender distribution across occupations came to be recognized as a socioeconomic problem, and federal legislation aimed at education, training, and employment began to address the issue over the next 2 decades. Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 and Executive Order 11246 in 1978 prohibited discrimination by schools and contractors receiving federal funds. The Carl D. Perkins Vocational Education Act and its successive reauthorizations established state equity coordinators and set aside program funds specifically for gender equity and single parents/displaced homemakers (SP/DH). The Nontraditional Employment for Women Act of 1991 amended the Job Training Partnership Act to require employment goals for women in NTOs, and the 1992 Women in Apprenticeship Occupations and Nontraditional Occupations Act (WANTO) provided technical assistance to employers and unions for integrating women into NTOs. In 1994, the School-to-Work Opportunities Act was intended to increase opportunities for people to prepare for careers not traditional for their race, gender, or disability (Ohio State University 1996; Olson 1999; Wider Opportunities for Women 1993).

Over the last 2 decades, have these combined efforts made a difference? According to the Department of Labor's most recent statistics (Women's Bureau 1998), a handful of NTOs are now 20-25% female, but many others remain at less than 10%, including firefighters (2.5%), heating/air conditioning mechanics (1.5%), and tool and die makers (0.2%). Despite the 1978 goal that the construction work force of 2000 would be one-quarter female, today's reality is about 2.7%, the same level as 1970, leading Eisenberg (1998) to assert that "the promise created by Executive Order 11246 has not been realized" (p. 4). Estimates suggest that "to reach parity in gender representation across occupations, 77% of the U.S. labor force would have to change jobs" (Beyer and Finnegan 1997, p. 4).

In education and training, secondary vocational enrollments are still largely gender segregated, with marketing being the only balanced program area. Although women have increased enrollment in postsecondary education overall, their numbers remain low in some program areas. Among vocational education faculty, women still predominate in health, home economics, and office occupations and are few in number in agricultural, trade and industrial, and technology education (Olson 1999). Wider Opportunities for Women (WOW) studied 15 STW programs, finding that 6 had few or no females; 90% of girls remained clustered in traditional areas (Milgrim and Watkins 1994).

At the end of the century, women represent nearly half the work force in the United States (47%), but 57% of those living in poverty ("No Easy Path" 1997; Sheng et al. 1996). Only about 10% of women work in NTOs, despite the fact that they can earn 25-30% more than those in traditional occupations (WOW 1993). Welfare reform makes this a serious concern, because the "types of jobs that welfare recipients can get without higher education or nontraditional job training do not pay adequate wages to lift women and their families out of poverty" (Bloomer, Finney, and Gault 1997, p. 2).

Why haven't equity efforts been effective? Perkins gender equity and single parent/displaced homemaker grants have been small and few in number; equity remains a low priority and is not adequately addressed in teacher education; and often minimal or no funds are appropriated for the equity provisions in some legislation (Olson 1999). A controversial provision of the 1998 Perkins Act is the elimination of equity and SP/DH set-asides, although nontraditional training and employment are now included in the definition of special populations and constitute a core performance indicator (Association for Career and Technical Education 1998). Another problem is the popular misconception that the equity battle has been won. Beyer and Finnegan's (1997) survey showed that undergraduates had low awareness of occupational segregation and the gender gap in wages and they consistently underestimated segregation. Both males and females tended to believe that gender equity has been achieved.

Good News

Some programs have succeeded in helping women enter a wider range of occupations. Among Perkins-funded programs, one example is Ohio's Orientation to Nontraditional Occupations for Women. A study of 280 women, 29% of all program completers from 1988-1995, showed that 71% found employment and 56% continued their training; of those employed, 23% were in production/manufacturing, 6% in construction, and 5% were technicians (Ohio State University 1996). An evaluation of New Jersey's SP/DH and sex equity programs "clearly demonstrates the success of the Perkins Act sex equity set-aside program in removing barriers to high-wage employment opportunities for women"(Montclair State University 1997, p. 13). A 5-year evaluation of New York's New Ventures program (Zhao and Fadale 1996) revealed an 81% completion rate; 60% of completers were employed, 78% in NTOs. The National Coalition for Women and Girls in Education (1995) evaluated Perkins equity programs in 10 states, some of which achieved decreased welfare dependence, at least a 10% increase in women in certain NTOs, and doubled income for more than 70% of program completers. Their report concluded that Perkins equity efforts have helped women move into high-skill/high-wage employment and are still needed; state sex equity coordinators are crucial elements in program success.

WOW's (1993) Nontraditional Employment Training (NET) Project has become a model for implementing the Nontraditional Employment for Women Act. In the District of Columbia, for example, 80% of NET participants are placed in nontraditional jobs averaging $8.50 per hour (Bloomer et al. 1997). Goodwill Industries' NEW Choices for Women places 89% of its graduates in construction jobs (ibid.). WOW's technical assistance website (www.workplacesolutions.org) describes success stories from programs funded by the WANTO Act. Eisenberg (1998) documents the accomplishments of many women in construction. Milgrim and Watkins (1994) describe an STW program, the Manufacturing Technical Partnership in Flint, Michigan, that achieved 40% female enrollment by focusing program elements on women.

The greatest increase of women in NTOs has been in professions (WOW 1993). This is both good news and bad news. On one hand, professional specialties and administrative/managerial occupations are among the fastest-growing occupational groups (Women's Bureau 1992). However, working women largely remain in nonprofessional occupations (73%), where NTO gains have been minimal (WOW 1993). The services sector, traditionally employing large numbers of women in low-paying jobs, continues to account for the lion's share of newly created jobs (Women's Bureau 1992).

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Why Such Mixed Results?

Apparently, some barriers remain impervious to the legislative and educational remedies attempted over nearly 3 decades. Channeling into traditional gender paths persists in the family and school, beginning early in childhood (Olson 1999; Stephenson and Burge 1997). Career counseling should broaden choices for all students, but "few counselors are actually trained to deal specifically with the vocational needs of nontraditional students" (Florida 1998, p. 32). Schneider (1993) found that "impetus from school, guidance counselors, or other adults" to encourage interest in NTOs "was conspicuously absent" (p. 43). Secondary and postsecondary instructors' attitudes have become more positive in recent years (Sheng et al. 1996), yet their perceptions of real-world barriers that nontraditional women will face consciously or unconsciously affect their students.

Women who persist through education and training face still more barriers on the job, including isolation from other women, lack of clean facilities, ill-fitting or wrong equipment, and difficulties with child care (Eisenberg 1998; Florida 1998; WOW 1993). Women are at greater risk for sexual harassment in NTO jobs or training (WOW 1993). Workplace sexual harassment lawsuits rose from 52% in 1990 to 72% in 1996 ("No Easy Path" 1997).

Psychological factors play a role in women's choice of nontraditional careers. "Resisting pressure to follow gender-traditional career paths requires exceptional strength and self-reliance" (Stephenson and Burge 1997, p. 161). Studies show women pursuing nontraditional occupations have a strong self-concept, internal locus of control, high motivation, higher self-efficacy, and perceive more opportunities (Read 1994; Schneider 1993; Stephenson and Burge 1997; Zhao and Fadale 1996).

However, focus on psychological factors can lead to an emphasis on individual compensatory approaches such as overcoming limited prior experience with tools, providing remedial math/science instruction, or teaching women to cope with harassment (Schneider 1993). What is needed are corrective approaches that address the wider sociocultural issues that constitute the greatest barriers still limiting women's participation in NTOs. These include gender-role socialization and workplace and school cultures that use male experience, knowledge, and cognitive/interactive styles as the norm (Turner 1995). This gives rise to the myth that women leave or do not enter NTOs because of a failure of will or ability (Eisenberg 1998). Another limiting sociocultural factor is women's awareness that, rightly or wrongly, they still have primary responsibility for the family, which serves to moderate or limit their career choices (Olson 1999). This has led to the myth that women "freely choose" not to enter NTOs (Sheridan 1997).

Eisenberg (1998) asserts that the myth of "men's work" has been replaced by the myth that only exceptional women can succeed in nontraditional work. Rather than opening the doors to more women, "pioneering" has become a permanent condition. Policy measures assume that removal of barriers through legislation ensures a climate of equal access and institutions behave as if males and females have equal social and financial resources (Turner 1995). For Eisenberg, there is no reason inherent in the work itself why the numbers of women in NTOs are still so low. The efforts of the last 30 years have been largely add-ons; they have not been institutionalized, and cultural/structural change has not happened. The "critical mass" that is a sign of real change may not occur until women have "a workplace that is as respectful and comfortable for them and as reflective of their needs and priorities as it is for men" (Eisenberg 1998, p. 204).

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